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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SOC](#) [EIND](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: FIERY WORDS FOR THE GOVERNMENT

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message boards "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Sohar Factory Fire
-- Hypothetical Kidnapping in Iraq

End summary.

The Flames of Criticism

2. A large fire at a plastics factory in Sohar (approximately 240km northwest of Muscat) generated minimal attention in the local press but spawned a vigorous discussion among al-Sablah members. Besides the usual armchair reporting from forum members - one writer asserted, "A huge fire burned almost 500 square meters of a Sohar factory" while another posted digital photos of the column of smoke - most respondents took the opportunity to criticize the response of local fire departments and the civil defense apparatus. "The fire started at 2:00 a.m. and burned until 7:00 a.m. because the firemen used water instead of special chemicals to try to put it out," reported one contributor. Another wrote, "Not only were the firefighters late in arriving, they were poorly equipped." Others recounted other incidents when fire trucks arrived at the scene of conflagrations with empty tanks.

3. Recognizing the massive amounts of investment flowing into the Sohar area, one contributor asked, "Sohar is an important industrial area that will see many new factories in addition to the new port. Why didn't the government think of establishing a comprehensive safety system, compliant with international guidelines, to prevent such incidents or at least to contain them once they occur?"

Imagine

4. After a CNN report alleging that an Omani diplomat had been kidnapped in Iraq turned out to be unfounded, one member posed a related hypothetical question: "Imagine that an Omani was kidnapped and a video of him being slaughtered is released. What would the government do?" As with the topic on the Sohar fire, the Omani government did not fare well in the ensuing discussion. "First of all, the Omani officials would deny the report without even checking or investigating," complained one contributor. Another offered, "How would we ever know about such a kidnapping? The government censors the media and controls the news, so we would never hear of it." A third respondent noted, "Compared to Europeans and Americans, Arab citizens hold no value to their governments. Their lives are not important, and the government would not lift a finger to help out a kidnapping victim."

STEWART